

The Buddhist Christian

A blog that examines the spiritual journey of a Christian pastor who discovered over a decade ago that his Christian spiritual walk was greatly enhanced by the influence of Buddhism.

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The Death of Joshu Sasaki

Zen fraud (not a master, in my opinion) Joshu Sasaki is dead at 107. He leaves behind him a legacy that includes sexually assaulting the female students in the interview room - perhaps all of them - yet here is how Tricycle Magazine memorialized him, in part:

Yet if Joshu Roshi was extraordinary in his reach, he was depressingly common in what we might call his grasp. As I reported in *The New York Times* last year—outing what had long been common knowledge in the Zen Buddhist world—Joshu Roshi had for decades groped and harassed female students, often quite violently. Although the board of one center received letters about his conduct as early as 1991, it was not until one of his former monks, Eshu Martin, posted an open letter on SweepingZen.com in 2012, that the board took action. An independent “witnessing council” of Zen teachers also initiated an investigation, publishing a report last year that described incidents like “Sasaki asking women to show him their breasts, as part of ‘answering’ a koan”—a Zen riddle—“or to demonstrate ‘non-attachment.’” When women reported sexually assaultive behavior, they found the male monks unsympathetic. And when I reported on this story last year, after Joshu Roshi had largely retired from active teaching, a reservoir of sympathy for the man still remained.

Bob Mammoser, a resident monk at Rinzai-ji, told me that he had been aware of allegations against Joshu Roshi since the 1980s. And he didn’t seem to doubt them. “What’s important and is overlooked,” he told me, “is that, besides this aspect, Roshi was a commanding and inspiring figure using Buddhist practice to help thousands find more peace, clarity, and happiness in their own lives.” He said that with teachers “you get the person as a whole, good and bad, just like you marry somebody and you get their strengths and wonderful qualities as well as their weaknesses.”

Joshu Roshi’s behavior was all too typical of the early generation of Japanese teachers in America, who arrived just in time for the explosion of interest in Eastern religion. They often embodied the dark side of the sexual revolution that was also underway, taking license with students, who often felt pressured by their immediate culture to give way and who found little support when they complained.

In the 1960s, four major Zen teachers came to the United States from Japan: Shunryu Suzuki, Eido Shimano, Taizan Maezumi and Joshu Sasaki. Andy Afbale, a former resident monk at a monastery founded by Eido Shimano Roshi, told me that three of the four—Maezumi and, more recently, Shimano and Sasaki—caused widely publicized sex scandals that brought great distress to their zendos and organizations. Even the one who was not tainted by scandal, Shunryu Suzuki, handed the San Francisco Zen Center off to Richard Baker, who became embroiled in scandal after it surfaced that Baker had had carried out affairs with several female members of his community.

Joshu Roshi’s impropriety with many of his female followers—and the collusive secrecy of his male followers—should not be forgotten. But it would be wrong to reduce the man to just this. He did have a grand side. “He’s both the friend and the enemy,” Leonard Cohen said of Joshu Roshi in the film *Leonard Cohen: Spring 1996*.

This article is but one more in support of rape culture in America. If I may be absolutely clear, enlightened teachers do not rape their students. People who rape their students are not enlightened teachers. To assert otherwise is to say that women are but so much rubbish to be disposed of however men wish. It is telling that no female students of Sasaki came forward to sing his praises. I am disappointed that Leonard Cohen, whom many see as a cultural icon in America, didn't have the moral strength to walk away and report what was happening to the police rather than depict Sasaki as both friend and enemy. The truth is that rapists are the friend of none, for they diminish us all. There is no grand side to rapists, no matter what else they do in life. How many would say of Roman Catholic priests who assaulted children that they were both the friend and enemy?

If there is a lesson to be drawn from this it is that we must not place our spiritual teachers, no matter the tradition, on a pedestal. Once we encourage people to believe that the teacher is fully enlightened, or a guru who has already finished the journey and is just hanging around for our benefit, or that the guru IS the Buddha, or that the priest IS Christ, we open the door for unscrupulous men like Sasaki to destroy lives in the name of religion and spirituality.

Perhaps we can only judge if people are fully enlightened in retrospect. Certainly Christ, Buddha, Muhammad, Moses, Elijah, and the other founders of the great traditions were. We can argue that some more recent teachers who have transitioned this life were as well, including some of the Hindu adepts, Dr. King, Thomas Merton, many of the Saints of the Christian tradition, and so on. Being fully enlightened isn't about never making a mistake in life, because as we move toward enlightenment we are going to make mistakes. Surely, however, an unrepentant serial sexual assault perpetrator can safely be said to have never seen the light. How much safer would we be to postpone judgment on enlightenment until people have passed, and instead settle for Lama Surya Das' answer to the enlightenment question when it was posed to him on "Buddha at the Gas Pump?" He answered, "I am enlightened enough for now." Refusing to join the many teachers today who claim full enlightenment to prop up dubious teaching legacies consisting mostly of plagiarisms, yet acknowledging some progress on the path, Das' honesty is to be commended in a world full of self promoting charlatans. Sasaki seems in part to have gotten away with his crimes because people were only too willing to see him as enlightened and therefore give him carte blanche to do whatever he wanted - and what he did was cause great damage.

Even Tricycle Magazine is complicit in supporting his crimes, refusing to be honest and call him what he was - a horrible criminal surrounded by conspirators before and after the fact in the name of the Dharma. How sad. How strikingly unenlightened. How criminal in that they, too, continue the cover up.